

## **Rats, Lice, and Exhaustion**

Trench life involved long periods of boredom mixed with brief periods of terror. The threat of death kept soldiers constantly on edge, while poor living conditions and a lack of sleep wore away at their health and stamina.

### **Pests and Pain**

Rats and lice tormented the troops by day and night. Oversized rats, bloated by the food and waste of stationary armies, helped spread disease and were a constant irritant. In 1918, doctors also identified lice as the cause of trench fever, which plagued the troops with headaches, fevers, and muscle pain. The unsanitary conditions of trench life, especially the cold, persistent dampness, resulted in trench foot, a frost-bite-like infection that in extreme cases, led to gangrene and amputation.

### **The Randomness of Death**

Random shelling and sniping characterized trench warfare, with earth-shattering or deadly rifle shots periodically breaking the boredom of trench life. The enemy remained largely hidden from view and soldiers often felt powerless against arbitrary and sudden death. The inability to defend oneself against shelling or snipers, and the constant hardships of trench life, contributed to extreme stress and exhaustion. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of Canadian soldiers were killed and wounded each day along the Western Front. The infantry and machine-gunners, which took the majority of casualties during the war, planned to lose 10 per cent of the total strength each month to death, wounding, and illness. The killing never stopped on the Western Front.

## **Trench Routine**

Life in the trench, the infantry's home for much of the war, involved a day-to-day routine of work and leisure.

### **"Stand to" at Dawn**

Each dawn, the usual time for an enemy attack, soldiers woke to "stand-to," guarding their front line trenches. Afterwards, if there had not been an assault, they gathered for inspections, breakfast, and the daily rum ration.

### **Day-to-Day Work**

Following morning stand-to, inspection, and breakfast, soldiers undertook any number of chores, ranging from cleaning latrines to filling sandbags or repairing duckboards. During daylight hours, they conducted all work below ground and away from the snipers' searching rifles. In between work fatigues, there was often time for leisure activities. Soldiers read, kept journals, wrote letters, or gambled.

### **Dangerous Nighttime Activity**

Nighttime in the trenches was both the busiest and the most dangerous. Under cover of darkness, soldiers often climbed out of their trenches and moved into No Man's Land, the blasted landscape separating the two armies. Here, work parties repaired barbed wire or dug new trenches. More aggressive operations involved patrolling for enemy activity or conducting raids to kill or capture enemy troops or to gather intelligence.

### **A Steady Trickle of Death**

Even in the so-called quiet moments, trench life witnessed a steady trickle of death and maiming. Outside of formal battles, snipers and shells regularly killed soldiers in the trenches, a phenomenon known as "wastage." This regular death toll ensured the need for constant reinforcements. In the 800-strong infantry units, "wastage" rates were as high as ten per cent per month, or 80 soldiers killed or incapacitated.

### **Maintaining Morale**

Many factors helped persuade soldiers to fight. The bonds of friendship, loyalty and community based on shared experience and common dangers were principal among them, leading to a strong sense of group identity, especially among small groups. Training, firm discipline and strong leadership also motivated soldiers and, the threat of punishment helped keep soldiers in line. Military traditions and values were also important, even in citizen-armies like Canada's, and the firm sense that most soldiers shared in the justness of their cause. The military understood many of the challenges to morale and the discomfort caused by life in the trenches. It tried to provide soldiers with the comforts necessary to sustain morale.

The strategic direction of the war affected soldiers daily lives, but simple pleasures were more important in maintaining mind, body, and spirit during long nights in the trenches or hellish enemy bombardments.

### **Comfort from Home**

Mail arrived daily from home. This was an important link back to loved ones, and soldiers retained an avid interest in the activities of family, friends, and community. Soldiers' letters were censored in the trenches by their officers, and often at various commands behind the lines, but the fighting troops still communicated with home about their life in the trenches.

Care packages from home were also a periodic treat, and came filled with much-needed food, magazines, and clothes. Soldiers received cigarettes as part of a weekly ration, and most men smoked constantly. Soldiers often pleaded with those at home to send more cigarettes, form their favourite brands.

### **Rum as Reward, Medicine and Motivation**

Army-issued rum was also important. When rum was available in the trenches, soldiers received a small dose in the morning and another at night. Rum was a reward, a medicine,

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and a combat motivator. Soldiers who had committed offences received no rum; those who had volunteered for trench raids or other dangerous missions received an extra share.

### **Faith and Fatalism**

Religious faith helped many soldiers cope with the horrors of war. Others relied on a sometimes morbid fatalism, resigning their chances for survival to luck, superstition, or inevitability.

### **Chaplains for the Religious**

Religion played a key role in the lives of most soldiers. Military chaplains of several denominations provided spiritual comfort and solace. Of the 440 who served overseas, 357 were Protestant and 83 Roman Catholic.

Chaplains gave lectures and sermons to large groups on religious parade, but they also engaged in personal conversations with soldiers, organized sporting events, and sometimes wrote letters on behalf of illiterate men. Many chaplains understood the great sensitivity required in their role, giving solace or guidance where requested, and refraining from unwanted harangues about the evils of drink or tobacco. Soldiers viewed chaplains who served close to the firing line with respect and admiration, but were less sympathetic to those who stayed far to the rear.

### **Faith in Chance**

Other soldiers found faith only in the randomness of events, having seen so little relationship between spiritual devotion and physical survival. Hardened soldiers who had witnessed countless friends and comrades killed often harboured a deep sense of resignation that nothing could deter death. In the soldiers' popular phrase, it would simply come when "their number was up."

### **"Shellshock"**

Shellshock was the blanket term applied by contemporaries to those soldiers who broke down under the strain of war.

### **A Poorly Understood Condition**

The pace and intensity of industrialized warfare had profound effects on the human mind and body that were not related to wounds or physical injury. Poorly understood at the time and for many years afterwards, the crying, fear, paralysis, or insanity of soldiers exposed to the stress and horror of the trenches was often held by medical professionals to be the result of physical damage to the brain by the shock of exploding shells. Military authorities often saw its symptoms as expressions of cowardice or lack of moral character. Its true cause, prolonged exposure to the stress of combat, would not be fully understood or effectively treated during the war.

## **Diagnosis and Treatment**

Doctors diagnosed almost 10,000 Canadians with shellshock during the war. Medical treatment ranged from the gentle to the cruel. Freudian techniques of talk and physical therapy helped many victims, while more extreme methods involved electric shock therapy. During the latter, patients were electrocuted in the hope of stimulating paralyzed nerves, vocal chords, or limbs. Shock therapy was more effective than Freudian techniques in returning soldiers to the front, with about two-thirds of all patients returned to the front. It is unknown how many relapsed when they re-entered combat.

Doctors knew very little of what we now term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and there were few treatment programs after the war for returned veterans who suffered from the mental trauma caused by war.

## **The Effects of Low Morale**

High casualties, poor food, and lack of sleep were among many factors that constantly threatened to undermine the morale, and therefore the fighting strength, of First World War armies.

## **Desertion**

Desertion, when a soldier chose to abandon his military unit, was one possible indication of low morale, and often reflected excessive stress, mental break down, or "shellshock." Some soldiers deserted directly from the front, while others simply chose not to return to their unit from leave. The army feared a trickle of deserters could turn into a war-losing tide, if left unchecked by exploring causes, preventing opportunities, and maintaining morale. To combat desertion, the army imposed the strictest punishments, including death by firing squad.

## **Self-Inflicted Wounds**

Self-inflicted wounds (SIWs) were another way in which soldiers attempted to escape the trenches, inflicting enough damage on themselves to escape front line service with a long hospital stay back in England. An SIW could take the form of a gunshot wound to the hand or foot, or rubbing chemically infected soil in one's eyes. There were 729 recorded cases in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and many more likely went undetected. Those under suspicion were typically sent to special SIW hospitals, subject to court-martial, and liable to sentences that ranged from a few days of field punishment to imprisonment.

## **Malingering**

Similar to SIWs, malingering included pretending to be ill, shell-shocked, or deliberately injuring oneself. Other malingerers exaggerated or prolonged their nervous symptoms once they were already out of the line.

Despite the strain on soldiers at the front, the number who tried to escape front-line service through these illegal actions was small.

## **Discipline and Punishment**

Obedience and order are the backbones of any military system. The purpose of military law, unlike its civilian counterpart, is to help ensure cohesion and victory through the imposition of discipline, and not to achieve justice.

### **Courts Martial**

The most serious offenders in the military were subject to courts martial. Regimental and district courts martial dealt with minor crimes, while general and field general courts martial handled more reserved for serious offences that could potentially result in a punishment of death.

A small group of officers sat on the courts martial. A "prisoner's friend" usually acted in the role now known as a defence lawyer, but the odds against an accused soldier were heavy. Surviving courts martial records held at Library and Archives Canada reveal that accused soldiers rarely gave long or detailed statements, and cases could be settled after only a few witnesses had been called. The vast majority of accused soldiers were found guilty.

### **Punishment: Imprisonment, Fines, Loss of Rank**

Drunkenness was the most common disciplinary offence, while more serious crimes included desertion, cowardice, and abandoning one's post.

Imprisonment, fines, and reductions in rank were customary punishments. Commanders also imposed what were called Field Punishments No. 1 and 2. Field Punishment No. 1, nicknamed "crucifixion" by the soldiers, entailed labour duties and attachment to a fixed object such as a post or wheel for two hours a day. Soldiers viewed Field Punishment No. 1 as particularly degrading. Field Punishment No. 2 differed only in that the soldier was not bound to a fixed object.

### **Punishment: Death**

The military passed over 200 death sentences on members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, but confirmed only 25. Twenty-two men were executed for desertion, two for murder, and one for the act of cowardice.

Condemned soldiers spent the night before their execution in the presence of a military chaplain. At dawn, they were led to a post to meet a firing squad. The firing squad of ten to twelve soldiers received both live and dummy bullets so that no one soldier could know for certain if he was responsible for the death. Following an execution, the names and offences of the condemned were published in General Orders and read aloud to assembled troops in order to serve as an example to all soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force.

## **Pardon for the Executed**

In 2001, the Canadian government added the names of those executed for desertion and cowardice during the war to the Book of Remembrance at Parliament Hill. In 2006, the British parliament granted an official pardon to all soldiers of the British and Dominion forces.

## **Medals and Decorations**

Medals and decorations provided soldiers with recognition of their length or type of service and were awarded for bravery or meritorious service. The awarding of medals and decorations could be a positive reinforcement to others in their unit or branch of service, but most felt they were doing their duty and did not serve to receive medals.

### **Medals**

Medals could be given for both service and bravery, but the most common were the service medals, such as the British War Medal 1914-1920 and the Victory Medal 1914-1919. The vast majority of Canadian Expeditionary Force members received these two medals. Far fewer qualified for the 1914-15 Star, which was awarded to service personnel who had served in France and Belgium prior to 31 December 1915, and the even rarer 1914 Star was awarded for service for those who served before 23 December 1914.

### **Decorations**

Decorations and select medals honoured soldiers for bravery on the battlefield or for distinguished service. The British Empire's highest award for bravery was the Victoria Cross, instituted in 1856. Seventy Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross during the First World War, many of them posthumously. Other decorations and medals awarded during the war included the Distinguished Service Order, the Military Cross, the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and the Military Medal. The first two were reserved for officers, with some Warrant Officers receiving the Military Cross, and the latter two were reserved solely for non-commissioned officers and other ranks. In the case of all of these medals, a second award was recognized by the addition of a bar, worn on the ribbon.

There were also distinctive decorations for naval personnel, such as the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Royal Red Cross for members of the nursing services. The new air services were recognized with decorations and medals for their particular environment. These included the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Force Cross.

As the war progressed, and the armies expanded rapidly, new medals were struck and they were issued more frequently. Some soldiers felt this diluted the distinguished effort required to be recognized with a decoration, but these decorations were still incredibly rare and most often awarded for heroic deeds of valour and sacrifice.